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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of social rejection and peer identification in the development of deaf community, by analyzing interactions through which deaf people are alienated from hearing people and identify with other deaf people. Life history interviews were conducted with 25 graduates of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. The respondents described experiences of alienation which recurred over a lifetime of interactions with hearing people. Respondents frequently described themselves as isolated within their family, due to poor sign language skills of family members. During their school years, the interviewees continued to experience social rejection and isolation in interaction with hearing peers and found social acceptance and community with deaf peers. They later faced social alienation in their interactions with hearing people at work, while experiencing companionship and shared identity through relationships with deaf people in the community. Interviewees turned to deaf people in order to meet specific needs which were not met through interactions with hearing people: real conversation, information, close friendships, and a "family" relationship. An interactionist approach to understanding deaf community illustrates that, through accommodation and a greater acceptance of individual differences, the larger community can embrace all its members. (JDD)

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Social Alienation and Peer Identification: A Dialectical Model of the Development of Deaf Community

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INTRODUCTION

In 1986, interviews were conducted with 25 graduates of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology (NTID at RIT). The purpose of the interviews was to learn about the graduates' family, school and employment experiences, with a focus on accommodations in the work place and career development. Interviews were unstructured, and respondents were encouraged to describe their experiences in detail, giving examples whenever possible.

Findings were organized according to broad categories of experience. For example, reports were completed on the employment experiences of the respondents, as well as their experiences in secondary and post-secondary educational settings.[1] However, one theme emerged as dominant and consistent across all categories of life experience; namely, the social rejection by, and alienation from the larger hearing community. Only when respondents described interactions with deaf people did the theme of isolation give way to comments about participation and meaningful interaction.

Further analysis of these interviews led to the idea that the development of deaf community is the result of both rejection and acceptance--rejection by the larger hearing community, and acceptance by a smaller community of deaf peers. Taken together, these experiences represent a kind of dialetic, or "push-pull" interaction. While this model is clearly an over-simplification of human behavior, the experiences of the respondents in this study suggest that the general pattern was true, at least for them.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the role of social rejection and peer identification in the development of deaf community is explored. In particular, the interactions through which deaf people are alienated from hearing people and identify with other deaf people are studied.

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[1] *These reports are: Foster, S. (1986) Employment Experiences of Deaf RIT Graduates: An Interview Study, Foster, S. (1986) Perspectives of Selected NTID Graduates on Their College Experience, and Foster, S. (1987) Student Perspectives on Life in the Mainstreamed School. All three papers are technical reports prepared for NTID at RIT within the Office for Postsecondary Career Studies and Institutional Research, and are available upon request.*

This dialectical movement can be described as a continuum, with total participation in the hearing community at one end and total involvement with the deaf community at the other.

The word "community" is used in this paper to describe a variety of social relationships, ranging from friendships to membership in formal organizations. Intermediate points along the continuum might include having a few hearing friends, marrying a deaf person, or joining a deaf club. The individual's position along the continuum is defined through interaction as well as the interpretations which participants give to interactions. The process of interpretation is cumulative--that is, each participant brings to a new interaction a history of past experiences, which he or she then uses to interpret the current interaction, relationship, or event.

There are several limitations to this model. First, it is clearly an oversimplification of a complex interaction. Deaf community is the result of many experiences, and cannot be explained solely through an analysis of social interactions. There are educational, political, linguistic, economic and geographical dimensions to community, each of which contribute to the development and maintenance of deaf community. Moreover, these dimensions are not discrete. For example, there is considerable overlap between the linguistic and social dimensions of interaction, as illustrated throughout the Findings section of this paper in comments of respondents.

Second, the dialectical model cannot explain the experiences of all deaf people. For example, some deaf people who experience alienation from the hearing world do not seek or achieve membership in the deaf community. Others are able to sustain rewarding interactions within both hearing and deaf communities. This model is helpful for describing the social dimension of deaf community, and for organizing the kinds of interactions through which the community is created and sustained.

The dialectical model, as it is used in this study, is based on the interactionist theory of deviance. While the term "deviance" is in many ways an inaccurate description of the deaf experience, the interactionist approach to understanding deviance is very helpful for the study of deaf community. Both people labeled "deviant" and people who are deaf have learned or been assigned a social role on the basis of their interactions with others. Much of what we know about how people who have been

labeled "deviant" acquire and respond to that social role can be applied in the study of deaf identity, community, and culture.

Briefly, the interactionists propose that deviance is a product of the interpretations of behavior which routinely occur in interactions between individuals, as well as between the individual and society. For example, Kitsuse (1968) suggests that "forms of behavior per se do not differentiate deviants from non-deviants; it is the response of the conventional and conforming members of the society who identify and interpret behavior as deviant which sociologically transform persons into deviants" (p. 26). In a similar vein, Becker (1963) describes the situational nature of deviance as follows:

> *...deviance is not a simple quality, present in some kinds of behavior and absent in others. Rather, it is the product of a process which involves responses of other people to the behavior. The same behavior may be an infraction of the rules at one time and not at another... deviance is not a quality that lies in behavior itself, but in the interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it (p. 14).*

One dimension of the social role of deafness is that the deaf person is an "outsider" to the larger hearing community; another is the definition of deafness as a "handicap." Perhaps the best illustration of the situational nature of deafness as a social role can be found in Groce's (1986) study of deafness on Martha's Vineyard. Between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries, a variety of factors combined to produce a high incidence of deafness which crossed all family and socio-economic lines within the Islander community. Through a review of original documents and interviews with elderly Islanders who either recalled the last decades of this period or knew stories which had been passed down through generations, Groce learned that the deaf Islanders were not perceived as handicapped, either by themselves or the hearing Islanders, because everyone knew sign language and accepted the deaf people as equal and full participants in island life. Groce's study raises questions about the role of hearing people in the development of deaf community. Do hearing people create the potential for deaf community? Put another way, if deaf people were fully accepted and linguistically accommodated by hearing people, would there still be a deaf community?

In their treatise on the sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckman (1966) suggest that "reality" is socially created and maintained through dialectical interaction between the individual and the collective; the individual both shapes and is shaped by the society of which he or she is a part. While deafness is undeniably a physical characteristic held by some individuals, I propose that "being deaf" is also a social role which is defined and maintained through interactions between deaf and hearing people. Further, I suggest that the development of a separate community of deaf people is made possible--perhaps even necessary--by the intolerance and failure of the larger community to accommodate its deaf members.

The Study of Deaf Community

The deaf community has been the subject of study by scholars in a variety of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and linguistics. As a result, there are several definitions of deaf community. For example, Padden (1980) defines "deaf community [as]... a group of people who live in a particular location, share the common goals of its members, and in various ways, work toward achieving these goals" (p. 92). Meadow (1972) emphasizes the linguistic dimension of deaf community, that is, use of American Sign Language (ASL) by members.

Perhaps the broadest definition of deaf community is that offered by Higgens (1980). In addition to the geographical and linguistic aspects, he draws on the work of Poplin (1972), to describe a "moral" dimension to deaf community, in that members experience unity and a sense of identity, or wholeness, within the group. He further notes that deaf communities are created through different kinds of interactions among deaf people, including friendships, marriages, and informal acquaintances, in addition to the more formal clubs and political organizations.

While almost all scholars of deaf community acknowledge the role of shared experiences such as social alienation and peer identification in the development of the community, few have made it a focus of study, and even fewer have studied shared experience from a cumulative, or "life history" perspective. For example, Jacobs (1974) touches on some of these shared experiences in his article on the deaf community. After stating that most deaf people enjoy at least some social activities with hearing friends, he adds:

> *However, very few of these deaf adults really find it possible and enjoyable to integrate with their hearing friends and devote all their social life to them. No normal, self-respecting deaf adult likes to find his rapport with his hearing friends repeatedly cut off whenever they turn to their other hearing friends and resume their ordinary conversation, which the deaf person finds to be very difficult and upsetting to follow. (p. 41)*

Although this is clearly a powerful experience shared by many deaf people, Jacobs does not pursue it in his discussion of deaf community, turning instead to statistics of incidence and descriptions of formal deaf organizations and clubs. Similarly, Padden (1980) acknowledges that "it has often been remarked that deaf people tend to seek out other deaf people for companionship" (p. 102) but focuses on location, language use and goals in her discussion of the characteristics of deaf communities.

Seidel (1982) proposes that "deafness has been an object of negation in society" and offers a dialectical analysis of the points at which deaf and hearing worlds intersect (p. 136). His analysis, grounded in open-ended interviews with two deaf adults, focuses on specific processes of negation, such as the stigmatization of communication skills, troubles resulting from the use of voice, and stereotyping of deaf people. While he offers some excellent examples of the tension inherent in interactions between hearing and deaf people, he is less successful in finding the common themes which bind them or describing the cumulative effects of these interactions on the development of deaf community.

Higgens (1980) adds to the description of this dimension of deaf community when he states that "shared experiences that come of being hearing impaired...[including] frustration in making themselves understood, embarrassing misunderstandings, and the loneliness of being left out by family, neighborhood acquaintances and others... help to strengthen a deaf person's identification with the deaf world" (pp. 38, 42). He further notes that the "...communality of experience and identity is the basis for belonging to the deaf community" (p. 44). And later:

> *....members of the deaf community have faced taunts and teasing, ridicule and neglect all their lives. The lack of social acceptance in the hearing world is pervasive. While members of*

the deaf community may not like it, it is something that they have grown accustomed to. (p. 140).

This "lack of social acceptance in the hearing world" and the process by which deaf people "grow accustomed to it" are the foci of this study.

Description of Respondents

Of the twenty-five respondents, 14 are men and 11 are women. They range in age from 23 to 46, with an average age of 27. Thirteen attended a school for the deaf during high school. The others attended mainstreamed high schools.[1] At the time of the interviews, 20 respondents were employed, three were out of the labor force, and two were unemployed. The employed respondents were working in a variety of jobs, including senior civil engineering technician, draftsman, mail handler, and photographic color technician.

Eleven respondents were married, in every case to a deaf person. Of the 14 single respondents, two were living alone, two were living with deaf roommates, and four were living with parents. (Information was unavailable for the other six single respondents.)

Findings

The deaf people interviewed for this study described experiences of alienation which recurred over a lifetime of interactions with hearing people. They also described experiences of identification and acceptance through interactions with other deaf people. Through the life history interview, it is possible to trace the cumulative impact of these interactions, from childhood and family relationships through their experiences as deaf adults. Findings are organized according to three broad categories of life experiences: family, school, and work.

Family

Most of the respondents said that their parents did not learn sign language. Frequently, respondents recalled that parents made this decision based on advice

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[1] *The term "mainstreamed school" is used in this paper to describe the range of educational environments available to deaf students within public or private schools serving primarily hearing students, includingspecial classes, resource groups, and support services within the regular classroom.*

given them by professionals. In the following excerpt, a respondent describes his life-long struggle to get his parents to sign, and his frustration with their reliance on the opinion of "experts" in this matter:

> *My fifth grade teacher [at the residential school] taught me to write letters to my parents and encourage them to learn sign language, and after a long discussion between my parents, both of them decided that it was not the best thing for the family to learn... but I wanted my parents to become sensitive to my needs and to my frustrations and my desires... I recall one good example that sort of bothered me. It happened a long time ago, when I went to NTID and I was discussing about vocational careers and I invited my parents to come [to a meeting with a counselor there]. During that time my parents and I had a lot of disagreement about communication in regards with sign language and they had asked my vocational counselor at NTID, "Should a deaf kid and hearing parents learn sign language?" And he said, "Of course you should learn sign language." And my parents just felt real awkward and then he asked me if I could help them with fingerspelling. I said to my parents, "Why? Why did you listen to this person, this counselor, who happens to be hearing and he works with deaf people for a short time, and I'm a deaf person and you don't listen to me?"... [My mom] was more accepting to what a hearing professional had to say more than what...deaf people [had to say]... So, you can see the struggle with the parents.*

Even when family members did learn sign language, respondents described communication at home as lacking depth, limited to basic vocabulary or fingerspelling. For example:

> *Interviewer: Your parents, do they sign?*
> *Respondent: My father is real slow; he just fingerspells. If it was really important, he'd write it down. My mother, she fingerspells. Yeah, she's pretty good. But it's boring for me to watch fingerspelling. I said, "Hey, why don't you sign?" [And she would answer], "Oh, I don't know how to do that." I said,*

"Come on." [Also] I have three brothers, none of them sign. Just say some words, like two words, one word. I say, "Hey, you know, let's have a good discussion and stuff." You know, they'd say, "Come on." You know, they pretty much limited me to that. They probably thought I was kind of lost. I said, "Come on...let's talk" and they didn't. You know, I guess it was just that family... they have a strange personality. You know what I mean?...

Sometimes a brother or sister would learn sign, but lose interest in communicating with the deaf sibling as they grew older and became more involved with hearing peers, as illustrated by the following story:

...my sister and I would get together and we would just sign secretly to each other... but it didn't work out because my sister was a little bit older and... [she] was pretty much concentrating on hearing people and I [was] pretty much left... out sometimes; so I accepted that whole thing and I lived through it.

Another respondent recalled his brother asking him to teach him sign, not because he wanted to communicate with him, but so he could cheat on tests at school.

One of the biggest problems described by respondents in relationships with family members was the lack of "real conversation," or information. The following quotations illustrate the frustration and isolation felt by these respondents and their concurrent attraction to deaf friends:

...When the family all gets together during the holidays to have a celebration or a family reunion, I experience a lot of isolation. My parents try to include me into the group and to interact, and yeah, I can do that, I know all of them, but my experience is still that for me I am sort of a loner.

They were pretty much limited and talked to themselves. For an example, like when we sit down and eat supper, I'd eat and I'd say, "What did you say?" And they'd say, "Wait a minute." And I'd wait and wait and wait. I'd say, "Hey, what are you guys

talking about?" They'd say, "Wait a minute." And [then] they'd say, "Well, what do you want?" You know, they should at least come back and finish the conversation, but they do that over and over and over, so I give up. So I just ignored it and eat. And I'd leave, I'd go out. Almost every day I always leave. They'd say, "Hey, why are you leaving us?" "Why?" I'd say. "Hey, 'cause you guys don't communicate with me--nothing. So what am I supposed to do?" So I'd go out and visit my deaf friends. Gee, I need to keep up with communication. And they'd go, "Oh, yeah." But they didn't understand, so I just ignored it and leave. Yeah, that's how it's been ever since I was a kid... and... they always left me out of everything. I needed that communication. You know, I needed to find out a little bit more of what was happening, and I learned from other deaf people.

My parents did learn basic sign language... but it's limited to what they do say to me. But you know, I go outside, out alone a lot, go out and ride the horses or do some work out in the yard. I do that by myself. Of course, sometimes I have my [deaf] friends around and we can go outside and do things.

My Mom and Dad didn't teach me, so the heck with them... I get my information from others, from my [deaf] friends.

In summary, respondents frequently described themselves as isolated within their family. Communication with family members was often difficult and frustrating due to the limited skill of family members in sign language. Ironically, communication was especially difficult during occasions which traditionally are sources of community and intimacy within the family, such as meal times and holiday gatherings. In response, those respondents who had access to deaf friends frequently turned to them for companionship and information unavailable at home.

School

Those respondents who attended a school for the deaf often experienced their first strong sense of community with deaf people at this time. For example, several respondents spoke about the institution as another kind of a family:

> *I went to the [residential school]. I was home four times a year. I didn't see my family much, but I felt that I belonged to the family at the institution. And still, in my heart I belong to the family at home, too.*

The family at the institution does not necessarily replace the family at home. However, over years of separation a shift in identity can occur, as illustrated in the following quotation:

> *One of the bad things is that my parents did not communicate with me and that they would plan to send me to school for the deaf and that they would tell me that I would be living there, be going to school there, they just said, "Come on, we're driving to [name of city]." We drove to [city] and they said, "This is the place where you're going to be. Goodbye!" And that was the most thing in my memory, that stands out the most and I will never forget about that. That experience terrified me up until about the age of 8 or 9 when I started to appreciate more going to school, because I started to develop more of an identity with my deafness... At ages 3, 4, 5, 6... I didn't recognize the difference between me, my parents, my brothers and sisters or my neighbor because most of the time we'd just be playing with things and it didn't require communication. We'd just play hide and go seek, basketball, baseball, things like that. So it didn't bother me until I began to recognize that I couldn't communicate and then I would say, "Stop, what are you saying?"... I needed to put a lot of time into communication. My needs were sort of separated from theirs, and my needs were satisfied at the school for the deaf. I was very enthusiastic to go to the school for the deaf and I didn't feel bad being separated from home when I was about 9 or 10 years old.*

For another respondent, this sense of separation and the acquisition of a "deaf identity" were more abrupt. As she put it, "I didn't understand why I was different until I went to [school for the deaf]."

About half the respondents were mainstreamed within public schools. Consequently, they did not have the same opportunities for interaction with deaf peers as did the respondents who attended the schools for the deaf. For the mainstreamed student, school often was a continuation--and in many instances an exacerbation--of the social isolation they had experienced at home. For example:

> *...high school, bad experience... I'm the only one deaf there, and it's hard for me to get along with the people. Sometimes they would leave me alone, sometimes they'd bother me, sometimes they'd pick on me, sometimes they'd laugh at me 'cause I can't hear, my mumble-jumble, and they didn't understand what I was saying.*

> *[The hearing students]... they'd be nice to me--they'd say "hi" and everything, but they don't... say "let's go to a party or to a movie" or something like that, outside of school. They wouldn't want me in that way, to be my friend personally. Like casual like--you see them every day, but that's about all. No personal friends, no.*

> *Respondent: A lot of guys wouldn't accept me because I can't hear on the phone. It's very frustrating for me to hear on the phone.*
> *Interviewer: You did okay when I talked to you.*
> *Respondent: That's because I had a hearing device on my hearing aid. At other times, it never worked. A lot of guys would say, "Oh, forget it, I ain't going to talk to her if she can't hear on the phone."*

These respondents were often aware of what they were missing, and expressed regret at the lack of close relationships with peers:

> *... being deaf was hard on me because I wanted more friends. I wanted someone really close to me, you know, who I could share a lot of things [with]. So I was very lonely.*

I didn't have any deaf friends. That was really bothersome to me. I had to depend on hearing peole all the time. I feel uncomfortable with hearing people. Sometimes hearing people really didn't understand me in communicating because they misunderstood.

Not many friends, but very small friends... It was disappointing. I wanted friends. At times I didn't have no friends over the weekend. Most of the time I played with my brother instead of my friends.

Others offered explanations of why hearing peers behaved the way they did:

They didn't want to talk to me... For example...like some hearing friends would like to play in different sports with me. Other people didn't like it because of the communication involved. They had their fears of a deaf person--maybe emotional or not emotional. You know what I mean? They didn't want to write notes back and forth. They didn't want to waste their time. Or they didn't have any patience with me.

I guess you really can't force people to be friends with you. You know... to communicate with the deaf... it's hard. You know, you have to put more effort into the communication... It's so easy to just sit back and gab with your friends; but with me they have to really pour more effort to communicate if they really want to be friends. And a lot of times, a lot of people don't want to be bothered.

Sometimes there were other deaf students in the school system. In these cases, the deaf students offered each other support and the pleasure of easy communication. In the following example, a respondent recalls her friendship with another deaf student:

During high school, there was another deaf woman there... That helped me a lot to know that there was another deaf person with their background... She was a senior and I was a junior--

[sometimes] ... we were able to take a class together. We had a good time and we were able to communicate, fingerspelling and how we whisper by lipreading without using our voice in math and photography [class].

Another respondent attended a large city school which served deaf students throughout the district. All the deaf students were assigned to the same homeroom, which provided an opportunity for peer instruction and friendship:

[the] high school... served different districts in the city, so a lot of students would come from different parts of the city, so most of my friends would be hearing-impaired friends. We would have our own homeroom... we had a home teacher who was also a counselor and tutors and so on. So this is where most of my friends are, and I didn't have many hearing friends--I had a lot of deaf friends.

Some respondents met other deaf people outside of school. For example, one person joined a club for deaf teenagers. Through the club, he met deaf peers from around the city. They formed their own basketball team, and taught each other "homemade signs:"

We had a social life at the weekend. There was like a "teenagers' club," so I would go there and rap with them, so I was never excluded from the deaf. I was always involved with the deaf community in many different ways.

For other respondents who attended mainstreamed schools, coming to a college for deaf students such as NTID was their first opportunity to meet deaf peers. For some, this resulted in a kind of "culture shock." They were overwhelmed by the presence of so many deaf people, and many did not know sign language. However, most learned to fit in quickly, and were delighted with the opportunities for social interaction. Some examples:

It was very lonesome for me through the [high] school years... NTID was my first deaf school I ever attended. [I was] kind of

scared at first, because the sign language was strange to me. As it turned out, I found happiness is to be with deaf people, rather than my lonely life.

... I became so popular and I couldn't understand it. It was... amazing, it was just from darkness to light in... a flash of lamp, and all of a sudden I was well recognized. I was well liked. I had a lot of friends, and I fit into almost any social situation. I was beginning to learn sign language, I was on a floor with all hearing impaired. It was an amazing experience and [I thought], "Wow, this isn't so bad!"

It [social life] improved a lot. You were able to develop a little bit more and you started to see a lot of growth. Yeah, there was a deaf crowd--that was better than it was before.

When I met a [deaf] girl and we became friends... it opened a whole new world for me. I became more social. I had friends.

Respondents said they learned from interactions with other deaf students at college. One said he learned about teamwork. Another said he learned "how to deal with the everyday pressures of life." A third credited a deaf college friend with teaching her the things her mother never taught her about sex and boyfriends.

Respondents also had opportunities to interact with hearing students at college. However, as illustrated by the following quotations, these interactions were not as rewarding or successful as those with deaf peers:

I never had the opportunity to communicate... I tried it a few times, but I couldn't understand a whole group of people talking. It was very difficult. It's not that I don't want... to associate with hearing people. It's just that I needed some support... And some people don't understand that. Then I tried to explain it to them, that I couldn't understand them because they were... talking too fast, and I tried to explain, saying that I couldn't understand in group settings, and the feelings, sort of like feeling left out.

You're sitting there and... you look around the room, and all of a sudden you're kind of lonely.

Sometimes with the hearing people you feel limited to what you can say. For example, two hearing people talking to each other and I'll ask, "Excuse me, what are you talking about?" [And they will say] "Oh, we're just talking about something. And that's it, that's all I get. I'm not comfortable with that, so I feel as far as communication goes, it's very limited [with the hearing] and I like it when it's more general.

Not too much [opportunities to interact with hearing students]... I couldn't read lips, so I dropped that... It was too tough and plus it was boring... Sometimes I'd write, and they didn't like it, so you know, I already know that they didn't want to sit down and write notes with me. Yeah, they're embarrassed... To me, it's nothing. You know, hey, I can afford the paper and stuff, that's nothing... Some were OK, there are some who were motivated, interested in deaf. But most of them didn't want to.

These difficult interactions with hearing students combined with the positive interactions with deaf students to reinforce the development of deaf community during the college years. In some cases, respondents said they found a new identity through interactions with deaf peers. As one person put it, "[college] was a wonderful experience for me... one of the things it taught me was 'who I was.'"

Several respondents described their deaf college friends as "family," in a fashion reminiscent of the earlier comments about friends at the school for the deaf. In the following quotations, respondents draw connections between family, community, and fellowship in describing their friends at college:

...When I went to [college for the deaf], I felt a part of a family. I was part of something and even though I've had... friends and I have my enemies at [college]...we have always still acted as a community--we didn't really try to break each other up in any way. We all stuck together.

> *...I enjoyed the association of my hard-of-hearing friends... I get the impression some of the deaf students are much more open than the hearing people... one of the things that impressed me with the deaf people was that they cared for each other even though they understood their handicaps--the friendships [and] the fellowships were evident.*

The effect of this new sense of community and social identity on students varied. Some maintained close contact with parents and other family members in addition to the "family" at college. For others, the shifting sense of family and community rendered the deaf person less tolerant of the isolation of home, as shown in the following:

> *I experienced a lot of anger, frustration at my family. One morning I decided it's time for me to go back to [college for the deaf] rather than stay home for one more day and I'd take my mother [aside] and said, "I'm going to go ahead and leave." My mother said, "Why, why do you want to go back?" And I said, "I feel that I'm alone here, I feel that I'm not part of the family, I feel that I have no communication." My mother said, "Well, we're all very busy planning, preparing for the family dinner and we're just real busy [getting ready] for the Christmas feast, we just have a lot going on." I said, "Yes, I agree with you, but I'm not objecting to that. But I still feel alone." So I just packed and left and I went back to [college].*

In summary, respondents experienced a variety of social interactions during their school years. Generally, they continued to experience social rejection and isolation in interaction with hearing peers. At the same time, they frequently found social acceptance and community with deaf peers. Over time, these experiences combined to create in respondents the perception that they were outsiders to the hearing culture.

Work

Most of the respondents worked in settings in which they were the only deaf employee. Generally, they said that they were able to communicate and interact with

hearing people at work "functionally," that is, they learned their jobs and were able to perform them adequately on a day-to-day basis. However, they were rarely able to develop relationships with hearing co-workers which allowed them to participate fully in social interaction. Once again, the deaf person felt isolated and out of touch, as shown in the following quotation:

> *They [co-workers] like to talk. I couldn't hear their talking. I'd love to hear what they're talking about... It's sad because I can't hear what they're saying, to share the fun, the jokes.*

Another described her longing for what she called "real conversation," and the loneliness she felt when her efforts to join the group were rejected:

> *Interviewer: At lunch and break time, do you sit with the hearing?*
> *Respondent: Yeah, but they don't bother talking to me--not much. I guess it's because they're too busy talking with people to bother talking to me.*
> *Interviewer: So what do you do?*
> *Respondent: Well, I just try to ask questions or whatever. Sometimes I feel funny, you know. Like, last week, here they're carrying on a conversation and I don't understand, and I'm asking the girl a question. What if what I was going to ask would be way off from what they were talking about?...*
> *Interviewer: So what did you do? Did you ask it anyway?*
> *Respondent: Oh, yeah. But, they're not interested in me. They're not, no. They're not intersted in being friends... Forget it. They only would talk to me for business things, you know, say, "We have a meeting," or just small [things], nothing really like a conversation. Or they might say, "How're you doing?" But they don't go into real conversations at all. It is lonely there, it is lonely there.*

The following quotation offers a powerful illustration of the role of interpretation in the creation of deafness as an "outsider" role:

> *...I can't keep up with the other people when they're talking with the group. I read the paper, I drink my coffee. When I don't have my paper, I watch other people, how they talk. And they look at me, they look strange at me. I don't know what they think of when they look at me. I feel funny...left out... You wonder what they're talking about... Sometimes I ask. Sometimes they say, "No, you don't have to know." You know, some people are nice, some people are not.*

The respondent quoted above was watching his hearing co-workers in order to follow their conversation through lipreading, in much the same manner as a hearing person might casually eavesdrop on the conversation of others. However, he says that the hearing people "look strange" at him when he does this. He is probably unaware that his hearing co-workers feel uneasy when he observes them so intently, or that they may possibly interpret his staring as rude. As a result, his discomfort increased and he felt even more socially isolated.

One respondent described the cumulative effect of social isolation as "negative confidence":

> *How do you get rid of negative confidence? I always have no confidence in myself when I'm working with hearing people... [and] I'm not the only one... We gotta get rid of it. How do we do it? We're afraid to go into the world of the hearing and that is the problem. I don't know how to deal with it... I'm afraid because I cannot hear what they say behind my back... You [hearing interviewer] can hear with two people talking in the same room or in the other room. I cannot hear... I hate to go back to work. I don't like to be the only deaf person. It's lonely... I always want another person who knows sign language, who understands deaf people. [Then] I would be fine. But I hate working alone, even though there's a lot of hearing people around.*

It is significant that this woman describes herself as working alone... "even though there's a lot of hearing people around." For her, being around people is not enough; social interaction and a sense of belonging to the group are also essential.

Most respondents felt they could do nothing to change or escape the frustration and social isolation which they experienced at work. Many adopted a philosophy of avoidance, acceptance or resignation. For example, one respondent, in discussing her frustration with the lack of comunication at work, said: "But I have to accept that. That's part of my life to accept that, so I accept it." Below, a respondent describes her feelings of resignation and subsequent decision to avoid her hearing co-workers:

> *Interviewer: How is your relationship with hearing co-workers?*
> *Respondent: Very distant.*
> *Interviewer: Can you tell me?*
> *Respondent: "Hello, hi, how are you, fine, what are you doing?" If I would see two or three of them talking together, I wouldn't even bother to ask them what they were saying. Very distant. Never became friends... [now] I just ignore it, started bringing a book, reading during a break, doing other things... I try not to think about it [the loneliness]. Just ignore it and do what I want to do to keep busy. That way you don't have to face it and get all upset and depressed.*

Resignation was often coupled with a sense of powerlessness, as illustrated in the following quotations:

> *They've got the power--they're hearing. You know, like from my experience, I sit down and interview with them all--and sure enough, I know that, hey, they look at me as a deaf person and they'll put my application in the file, and that's the end of it. You know, they say, "Well, you can't do this because you're deaf" and they don't want to be sued, so they'll just say, "Hey, we'll see if there are any openings, and we'll go through the process," and they'll just put the stuff in the trash can anyhow. You know, so you don't get them for discrimination and stuff. You don't have anything to prove... you can't tell 'em, you know, "Why not me?" ...they're the ones that decide anyhow, so I'm stuck.*

Respondent: My first job... I didn't know how to speak English very much. I go in cafeteria [and] everybody was talking to me. I don't understand it very much but to say "Huh, what?" about a hundred times--I rather shut up and say "Yeah, yeah." [Nods head up and down.]
Interviewer: Oh, so you nod?
Respondent: Yeah, well, what can you do? It's not that deaf people can improve. The hearing people can. They can go to school and learn sign language. We cannot make anything better. Is that why they call it "handicap?"

You really can't change the world itself... If that's the way they [hearing people] are, you gotta accept 'em, no matter, even if I didn't or do like it... you have to accept. Yeah, sometimes it hurts, sometimes not.

It is important to note that these feelings of resignation and powerlessness did not develop solely as a result of experiences in the workplace. Rather, they reflect the cumulative effect of years of alienation, rejection, and social isolation. As one respondent put it, "I've been frustrated all my life." Another respondent, who described himself as having a "social handicap," traced the origins of his current inability to trust people to experiences in the mainstreamed school. Even though he was able to understand and forgive the cruelty of his hearing classmates, he had not recovered fully from the painful experiences of those early school years:

I did not know how to hang around with the hearing people. They constantly make fun of me, they tried so many times to put up a fight with me. Several times I was involved in a...street fight. I really don't have much of a bitter [feeling] at all now at what happened in the past. You know, I just feel sorry for them, because they didn't understand me as well as I didn't understand them... So I think that had a lot to do with what's happening to me as the person I am now... I've become shy. I learned to be shy as I was growing up. I learned to be quiet. Most of my friends today are complaining that I keep it to myself

too much... Many times I [would] like to talk out interpersonal relations, insights. Many times I can't. I don't trust them. I don't know, that's the way I am. I don't get close enough to any[one] who is willing to listen or share with me.

The respondent quoted above described himself as isolated from both deaf and hearing people as a result of his earlier experiences. However, most respondents found companionship and social acceptance with deaf friends and social groups. For example, several said they belonged to deaf clubs or enjoyed informal social activities with deaf friends. Eleven of the respondents were married, in every case to a deaf person. Others attended a deaf church or shared an apartment with deaf friends. Still others were members of deaf professional organizations or public service groups. It is also worth noting that all the respondents chose to remain in Rochester after graduation in order to maintain college ties or take advantage of the large deaf population here. In short, almost every respondent said they had formal or informal ties to the deaf community, through marriage, friendship, or membership in a deaf organization.

Respondents offered a variety of reasons for participating in the deaf community. Generally, however, their explanations centered on the common theme of shared experience and the need for social interaction. In the following quotations, two respondents describe what the deaf community means to them:

...the deaf find a meeting place for social[izing]. You know, when we are in the hearing world, we cannot fit in, and we become very lonely. So we need a place to social[ize]... you know, I think it's like unity... for our own benefit 'cause, like, you know there's some ... that might be a lot worse than me... even though I'm frustrated myself in the hearing world. But I'm sure there's much worse, people much worse frustrated than I am, because where does it leave them? They're so lonely always. So deaf people, they really need one another.

I think deaf people tend to, one way or another, associate... among themselves, even though they... may not know each other. We are a community of people. We are, in a way, very close to

each other even though we never know each other, because we are a minority.

Another respondent drew parallels between deaf community, culture, ethnicity and family:

Many people think that deaf and hearing are the same. It's true, yes, but it's different. Deaf culture is more deaf. [If] you're deaf, [and] I'm deaf--we're family... One of my questions is how often do you see some of your old high school classmates?... You don't see them for a long, long time, right? How often do I see my old classmates? Often! Compared to your [hearing] culture and compared to my culture, it's different... Deaf culture are always more involved with family, we're deaf family... When you see hearing and deaf, they're the same, but in the way of family ties, they're two types of families and they are not the same. It's the same thing with Italians... Russians... different ethnic groups. Some of those people don't understand English, so they stick together... They have a Polish culture, and they have the same as the deaf. I can't have good time with my [hearing] cousins. The brothers and sisters say "Hey, come on, let's have a good time" and I say "Uh..." But with the deaf there's always good things to do and [so] we go with the deaf.

This same respondent offered an equally eloquent explanation for his decision to marry a deaf woman:

I married my wife and she's deaf. We are both deaf and we go to... the deaf clubs. If I married [a] hearing wife, what would happen to her? I'd leave her flat. Why? Would she visit the deaf club? I'd say maybe one sixteenth would say "Yes" and fifteen-sixteenths "No." They go to the hearing club--they go to the clubs and dance. Am I going to be able to interact with the hearing? No way. They don't know me. They don't know me that much for a long time. So I'd be just sitting back doing nothing. I'd say "I don't want to go to a hearing club" and my wife would say "I

don't want to go to the deaf club." We['d] become opposites.
Opposite cultures and opposite lives.

In summary, respondents continued to face social alienation in their interactions with hearing people at work. On the other hand, they experienced companionship and shared identity through relationships with deaf people in the community.

DISCUSSION

Through the life history interview, respondents described a variety of interactions with hearing people, including relationships with family, classmates and co-workers. With few exceptions, these experiences were frustrating and unsuccessful. In contrast, their experiences with deaf peers were rewarding.

Analysis of their comments suggests that respondents turned to deaf people in order to meet specific needs which were not met through interactions with hearing people. First, they were seeking real conversation. Communication with hearing people was almost always difficult. As a result, conversations were usually superficial. In comparison, communication with other deaf people was easy, and therefore permitted more in depth conversation.

Second, respondents wanted information. From their comments, it seems that by "information," they meant access to the basic knowledge routinely learned through interactions and conversations with family members and peers. Since communication and conversation with hearing people was difficult, their access to information through these channels was limited. Most of the respondents were very much aware of what they were missing at home or in the mainstreamed school. They turned to each other in an effort to "learn about the world."

Third, respondents wanted opportunities to develop close friendships with others. Strained and difficult interactions prohibited the development of close relationships with hearing people, even when these people were relatives. In contrast, friendships were more easily established with deaf peers.

Fourth, respondents were seeking family. By "family," I mean the kind of intimacy, acceptance and shared identity which is traditionally associated with family. Most of

the respondents were denied full membership in their original family--they felt lonely and isolated, even in those situations when family interactions are the most relaxed and intimate, such as during meal times and holiday gatherings. The deaf community offered an alternative kind of family, in which the deaf person could experience full participation, acceptance and shared identity with other members.

The deaf people included in this study were not "born into" the deaf community or the social roles of "handicapped" or "outsider." Rather, they learned about deafness and the deaf community through interactions with hearing and deaf people. Through their interpretations of these interactions, they developed a shared perspective about what it means to be deaf in American culture. These interpretations were cumulative, that is, each new interaction further shaped the deaf person's perspective about deafness. The fact that their interactions with hearing people were so routinely alienating suggests that the cumulative effect was one of confirmation, rather than modification, of the original "outsider" and "handicapped" roles.

The interpretation of interactions, by both deaf and hearing people, is critical to the social construction of deafness. For example, during recent interviews with supervisors of deaf people (conducted for another study), I was struck by the regularity with which they described their deaf employee as "shy, quiet... a loner." Further, there was a shared understanding on the part of several supervisors that deaf people prefer to be with each other, rather than with hearing people. Some examples:

> *Supervisor: He [deaf employee] wouldn't take breaks with people... for the most part he'd just sit and read. He'd go up to the cafeteria and he'd bring his lunch down here and he'd just sit and read a book or a newspaper.*
> *Interviewer: Well, do you think he ever felt lonely?*
> *Supervisor: No, not really. He's a really strong-willed person. I think that he was that way because that's just the way he wanted to be. He was that kind of guy... just his personality... you know, he was more of a loner.*
>
> *Mostly Mary has lunch by herself... I noticed that most of the time she reads the paper at lunch time. You know, hearing-*

impaired people love to read the paper. They catch up on all the news that way. So you know, they read it all the time. Besides, she's not that friendly with the other people.

What we do is we accommodate them [two deaf employees] so they can be together. They go to lunch together... They're buddies. I mean, if I was a deaf person, I'd certainly want to communicate with a deaf person at lunch.

These supervisors' observations of their deaf employees' **behaviors** are probably accurate, since many of the deaf respondents interviewed for this study said that they do not interact socially with hearing people at work. However, the interpretations which supervisors offer about **why** the deaf employee behaves the way he or she does should be studied as activities through which deafness **as a social role** is constructed, rather than as reliable or accurate descriptions of intrinsic characteristics of deaf people.

Similarly, the comments of deaf resondents included throughout this report illustrate their interpretations of interactions with hearing people. The following quotations are illustrative:

I guess it was just that family... they have a strange personality. You know what I mean?

[Hearing people]... they're not interested in me. They're not, no. They're not interested in being friends.

They've got the power--they're hearing.

[Deaf and hearing]... opposite cultures and opposite lives.

Through interaction, deaf and hearing people "negotiate" the social meaning of deafness. Historically, the dominant hearing culture has assigned deaf people to social roles such as "handicapped" and "outsider," and in response, deaf people developed a shared understanding of these roles. Sometimes, this understanding led

them to challenge these interpretations. It also led them to create alternatives for themselves and other deaf people. The deaf community is one such alternative.

In recent decades, deaf people have begun to work together to renegotiate their social role within the larger hearing culture. Ironically, the political base of deaf community from which they have drawn the strength and unity of purpose to challenge the social construction of deafness as a "handicapped" or "outsider" role is in fact created and maintained (at least in part) **in reaction to these roles**. If everyone used sign language, would deafness be a handicap? If deaf people were not treated as outsiders, would there be a deaf community?

In the long run, it may prove most fruitful to compare the development of deaf culture and community with the histories of groups which have suffered social and political oppression. For example, in his discussion of the "phenomenology of domination," Adam (1978) makes the following observation:

> *Black or Jewish or gay identity arises from no intrinsic biologic quality in itself. Intrinsically they are nothing. Only the image of self, reflected by others able to influence or control one's life or survival, necessarily organizes the self's priorities and orientations (p. 11).*

Similarly, in his study of racial oppression in America, Blauner (1972) observes that "the paradox of black culture is its ambiguous debt to racial oppression... racism has been such an omnipresent reality that the direct and indirect struggle against it makes up the core of black history in America" (pp. 140-141). The same observations might be made about the deaf experience.

One of the central implications of this study is that we all play a role in the development of deaf community. This role is both individual and collective. It is also interactive--we shape and are shaped by the society of which we are a part. The interactionist approach makes possible an understanding and acknowledgement of shared responsibility for the social construction of deafness. It also holds the blueprint for change: through accommodation and a greater acceptance of individual differences, the larger community **can** embrace all its members.

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